

THE BLIND IN POST-WAR EUROPE

ROBERT B. IRWIN

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The Blind in Post-War Europe

By Robert B. Irwin

Executive Director
American Foundation for Overseas Blind

It is difficult for us living in a country which experienced practically no physical damage from combat activities to realize what war has done to the blind people and to agencies for the blind in Europe. Where active fighting was carried on, many schools for the blind were completely demolished; in other cases the buildings were damaged by gunfire. Braille slates and other metals were confiscated to make munitions. Braille books were used for fuel. A number of the workshops for the blind were so badly damaged that nothing remains but unheated cellars with temporary roofs in which sightless workmen are trying to earn a

little toward their support. In several countries the braille printing plants were so completely wrecked that there is not a vestige of the old machinery in existence.

Reliable estimates indicate that there are some 400,000 blind people—many of whom are women and children—in the continental European nations outside the Soviet sphere of influence. Of these upwards of 10,000 lost their sight directly or indirectly as a result of war. The war blinded include not only those whose sight was destroyed in combat but those who are blind from malnutrition and such accidents as have resulted from children playing with

hand grenades and land mines left behind by the retreating enemy.

The post-war governments have done little for the blind population. An outside observer visiting Europe is impressed with the leadership assumed by sightless people in salvaging what is left of the old institutions and otherwise furthering the welfare of their fellows. These people are pleading with Americans for help in getting their organizations going again. Many years will elapse before much is accomplished unless assistance comes from friends of the blind in America.

The relief agencies helping the general population of Europe usually serve the blind in common with other people, but the technical aids required by people without sight, such as braille slates, braille writers, typewriters, and the like, are not provided by these agencies. The only American organization supplying this kind of assistance is the American Foundation for Overseas Blind, 22 West 17th Street, New York. This agency is affiliated with the better-known American Foundation for the Blind.

An effort is being made by the American Foundation for Overseas Blind to raise \$300,000 this year to meet the emergency needs of the schools with a minimum amount of rudimentary equipment, such as braille slates, braille paper, braille books, and the like, and the workshops for the blind with much-needed tools and machinery. Braille printing plants are most urgently needed, if the blind school children are to have text-books and the adults to have reading material not available to them now. In addition to this, some way must eventually be found to help the workshops obtain raw materials. This will involve a working capital of from one to two million dollars. Assistance must be extended to the blind of Europe while they are striving to help themselves. If this is unduly delayed, those courageous souls who are putting up a gallant fight today will succumb. Blind children will grow up in ignorance with nothing to look forward to but hopeless despondency and with no prospect better than begging.

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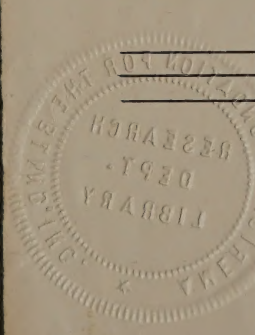
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